

May We Go Mad Together by [californianNostalgia](#)

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Summary:

A character study of the three teenagers of Stranger Things.

May We Go Mad Together

Author's Note:

Title taken from Robin Morgan's poem "Monster".

Steve Harrington had no filter. He had strong feelings, and as soon as he learned how to talk, he sculpted those feelings into words.

They called him feisty, the aunts and uncles that came to visit on Christmas with arms full of customary gifts. They called him honest, the grandparents who slipped sweets into his hands and smiled like they saw something incredible on the top of his head. Fun, the little kids around the elementary school playground called him as he led them in tag. Witty, giggled the girls of his middle school clustered around him during break. *King*, the high school basketball team named him after he'd chugged an impossible amount of liquor in one go.

(No one called him out for what he was. Steve realized that a lot later, after the flickering lights and the nailed bat and the first real monster of his seventeen years of life, after he'd had time and reason to think on how he'd lived. He realized they'd let him get away with rude words and sharp jabs because he was beautiful, shaped prettier than a shampoo commercial, and people rarely told beautiful people what they didn't want to hear.

But even beauty got old when you looked at it long enough.)

His parents weren't very fond of him. He didn't remember ever seeing his father without his Disapproving Frown. His mother simply gave up sometime early in his childhood and frequently asked his father for romantic trips to new places, annoying tyke not included.

Nancy Wheeler liked to ask questions when she was younger. Where

does that door lead, what does that button do, what makes the stars sparkle like that, etc. There were so many questions to be asked, so many answers waiting to be discovered, explained.

When she asked what made glasses work, her father snorted like she'd said something funny and patted her head as one would a small puppy. When she asked what a "real estate" was, her mother gave her a vapid smile and told her little girls had no need to know about such boring things.

Joyce Byers was a ferocious mother. She loved her children with all her heart. If her children were in danger and the only way to get them back was to raze heaven and hell, then by god she would find a way to burn them both to the ground and hug her children close on top of the subsequent mound of ashes.

It was just that Joyce and Lonnie put together meant yelling and fights and cigarette butts filling up the smoke tray.

(It was just that usually in Joyce's eyes, the one that needed protecting was the smaller wisp of a child with the soft straw-blond hair. Jonathan was capable. Jonathan was old enough. Jonathan hadn't been the one who'd been taken by a monster that crawled out of the shadows.)

They weren't very good at parenting, Jonathan Byers's parents. So he learned. He learned how to break eggs cleanly and not to get any shards on the frying pan. He learned that money was important, and the means to earn that money was to get a job and work shifts no one else wanted. He learned music, how to work the stereo and how to make his headphones pound with songs that drowned the world out. He learned to teach his baby brother about rock bands, and how to tune out the raging war going on in the living room.

The moment Steve saw Nancy Wheeler and her incredible smile for the first time, he was lost.

Steve Harrington was beautiful. Nancy had never known brown eyes could be that lovely. She thought it was unfair. Steve shouldn't have had brown eyes. He should have had something boring, like blue.

He was laid-back. He was popular. He smiled easy and laughed easy, especially when he was with her. He was the manifestation of every teenager's secret fantasy, and he seemed to like her. *Her*, the boring, perfect Nancy Wheeler who never did anything outside the rules.

It gave her a head rush. Someone genuinely thought she was special. It certainly helped that the Someone was quite charming, and handsome to boot. *Is this what love feels like?* she wondered, staring up at her bedroom ceiling.

(Once, she lost sleep questioning whether the school jock actually liked her. Several weeks later, she lost sleep thinking of entirely different matters, like a man-eating monster that murdered her best friend.)

She felt special, and lovely, and when he beckoned her up the stairs to his room, she shrugged Barb off and followed. When he looked at her like she was the most beautiful thing he'd ever seen, but still waited to touch her, waited until she allowed him to press a sweet kiss to her lips, she pulled her shirt off and thought, *This is my choice, and I choose you.*

That night, she felt important, and loved, and ecstatic in the knowledge that for once these feelings had roots in truth.

Then everything fell apart around her.

What are you doing, Jonathan's common sense kept saying. *This is wrong, this is too far, what on earth are you doing.*

But his eyes were saying, *This is a moment worthy of preservation*, and Nancy Wheeler was saying, *I am me*, and she was beautiful and unbreakable and he'd wanted to give her a little nod of greeting when their eyes met across the cafeteria but hadn't.

He took the picture of Nancy Wheeler standing at Steve Harrington's window, moments before she turned round and declared she wasn't afraid.

What are you doing, his common sense kept yelling in his ear like a tinny fire alarm, but he didn't particularly care to acknowledge what kind of idiocy he was partaking in at the moment. His little brother was dead, his mother was descending into madness, and these bunch of teenagers in a mansion hidden by trees were laughing and loving and going through everyday emotions as if the world wasn't crumbling down around them. Common sense had little standing ground in his brain.

It was envy, a little bit. It was fascination, regarding something he had no experience of. It was grief and recklessness and curiosity. He so rarely had occasion to capture moments of joy, of playfulness. He wanted to know what kind of pictures those foreign emotions would make.

He was blinded by many things that day. Nancy Wheeler standing by the second story window was one of those things. But she was not the only thing that prompted him to click the shutter.

He pointed his lenses at Barbara Holland perched on the edge of the diving board and pondered taking a picture of her too, because she looked lonely and he knew enough about loneliness to know it would make a terribly sad—albeit a satisfactorily accurate—picture. Then

his camera malfunctioned. When he looked back up, Barbara Holland was gone.

He left without realizing a redheaded girl had been dragged into the void by the same monster that had taken his brother.

(He wondered afterwards, lying stiffly on his thin mattress and unable to coax sleep to lower his eyelids, whether things could have played out differently. If he hadn't looked away from Barbara, alone in her most vulnerable moment and dripping blood into the pool for the shark to follow, could she have lived?)

(Nancy wondered, too. In quiet nights, she wondered whether she could have prevented her best friend's death if she hadn't decided to follow Steve Harrington upstairs.

Just one more similarity shared between two people who'd thought they were nothing alike.)

Selfishly, the first thing Steve could think of was that his parents were going to kill him if they found out he'd thrown a party.

He wasn't really concerned about Barbara. He thought she must be playing some kind of attention-grabbing stunt in the form of a staged disappearance. He thought it might have had a thing to do with the way no one had paid her much attention at his pool party. He was familiar with the need for attention, the lengths one could go to for an extra look thrown over a shoulder. He didn't think much of Barbara's tactics. *Old*, he thought. *See-through*.

He had no filter. He'd never had one. He expressed his stupid, selfish concern to Nancy Wheeler, and the look of poorly suppressed disgust on her face burned into his memory like a brand.

Nancy was a straight-A student. She'd never gotten into trouble at school. She'd never been grounded. She did her homework, she studied hard, and she avoided short skirts because they flashed more thigh than she was comfortable with at round-eyed males passing by in the hallway.

But the moment she'd let one boy into her heart and allowed him to touch her, everything she'd built up until then went down the drain without so much as a warning sound. Suddenly everyone was staring holes into her back, hiding incredulous laughter behind their hands and whispering exchanges of "Really?"s that tickled her ear. Her mother looked at her like she'd stabbed a child. The police officer who came to question her about Barb leered at her and asked her thinly veiled questions—not about Barb's disappearance, but about her love life, which was apparently a town-wide gossip topic now.

She wanted to break something. She wanted to scream. She *did* scream at her mother, but she could not scream at the leering man in the police uniform cockily tilting his chair back. She *wanted* to scream at him. But there was shame running through her, shame and anger and fear, and if she opened her mouth now, she wasn't sure she would end at a tantrum and some broken porcelain.

Screaming at police officers and breaking plates was not what Perfect Nancy Wheeler did. (Not yet.) That was a bit too hard.

Instead, she went to find Jonathan Byers at his little brother's funeral and told him she wanted to go looking for the monster in the woods.

Baby steps.

"You don't have to do this," Jonathan told her, and she said, "That thing took my best friend," and he understood.

Jonathan Byers was like a sculpture for one of those famous Greek tragedies. He was a riddle waiting to be solved, and Nancy was fascinated by riddles.

At first, there was shock. Discovering he'd taken half-naked pictures of her from the bushes was not a great opener for friendship. But he was the only one who took her seriously, when she talked about Barb. He listened, they grabbed a gun, and they went hunting through the woods.

When he pulled her out of the flip-side shadow world, he held onto her hard enough to bruise. When they wordlessly hugged each other in terrified relief, gripping harder for the reassurance that they were here and real, Nancy thought he was the only solid thing about her life.

Steve had no filter. The betrayal he felt toward the girl with the incredible smile came pouring out of him the moment he opened his mouth. He was a punctured beer can, popped open to leak and leak and leak. You couldn't stop an opened can from leaking. Either you threw it all back in one go, or you threw it in the trash can.

Nancy Wheeler slapped him, eyes brimming red. Byers pulled her away, and rage coated everything in Steve's sight. He chased after them, throwing wicked words at their backs, ones he knew would stick, ones he knew would hurt. He ranted and leaked and called Joyce Byers crazy. Jonathan Byers punched him in the face and kept on punching him until a cop dragged him off.

When Nancy found out her little brother was also neck-deep in weirdness and had spent the day fleeing from secret agents, she couldn't help but think, *How did we get ourselves into this?*

The way he looked at Eleven was disgustingly sweet, though. If she wasn't too busy planning to kill a shadow monster, she would have thought them adorable.

When Steve stepped into the Byers residence and saw them armed to their teeth with bloody bandages wrapped around their palms, he didn't know what to think. Christmas lights were hung up on every corner of the ceiling, the furniture had been pushed back to the walls, and he didn't know what to think of that either. Byers was yelling at him to leave and Nancy was pointing a gun into his face and he didn't understand what was going on except that Nancy hated him enough to point a loaded gun at him.

Then the lights flickered overhead and the color drained out of Nancy Wheeler's face.

He almost drove away. He almost let the reckless heroes deal with the monster on their own.

Terror was not an emotion he was familiar with. It rattled his fingers, shook his skull, awoke the most primal parts of his instincts. *Run*, his body screamed, *death is behind you*. *Run*, his head screamed, *you stand no chance against that creature*.

But when the lights flickered inside the Byers house for the second time, Steve Harrington paused with his car door halfway open and thought about Nancy Wheeler and her Incredible Smile. He thought about the monster sprouting out of the poorly papered ceiling like some obscene flower, clawing itself in from a world hidden somewhere between walls and shadows. He thought about Byers

armed with a stupid bat studded with rusty nails and Nancy with a less-than-full barrel.

He slammed the car door and ran back inside.

(A good thing he did, too, because if he had let them play hero on their own, Byers would probably have died.)

(... And Nancy, too. Probably.)

(He tried not to think about that very much. He didn't like to wonder what would have happened if he hadn't charged back inside with crazed fear running through his veins and grabbed a bat off the floorboards.)

It was dumb luck. It was chance, coupled with some good planning. Somehow, between three scared teenagers, one nailed-up baseball bat, a bear trap, some gasoline, and a lighter, they beat back the nightmarish demon-thing until it retreated into its flip-side universe once more.

There was an old mirror in the bathroom. It was a little stained, and hairline cracks wove around the edges, but it was a decent mirror. Perfectly serviceable.

Jonathan had no illusions about what he looked like. He was old beyond his age, wrinkles bordering his mouth and perpetual dark purple dusting the hollows beneath his sunken eyes. He knew he was weird. He was the pretentious one sitting in the back of the class, obsessed with photography and disinclined to hold a conversation longer than several seconds. He was the rumpled, silent son of a harried single mother. *Those Byers are a strange bunch*, people said, uncaring as to whether their voice carried, *no doubt about it*.

He had known he was nothing close to what most people deemed attractive since he could look in the shoddy mirror on his bathroom

wall without a stepping stool.

Steve and Nancy were his complete opposites. They were pretty. They were popular. They were even prettier together, and everyone said so—even the ones who whispered vicious things behind the pretty couple's back.

Jonathan knew where he stood. He knew exactly who he was.

So while Nancy was distracted with Steve—smiling her huge smile, dimples and all—Jonathan walked away. He folded up the garish orange flier and stuck it in his pocket where he wouldn't have to look at it. He did his best to forget about the Halloween party.

Steve was naive. The Gate was closed. The monster had evaporated, along with a scary little girl who had secret government agents searching for her. It felt like he was waking up from a bad dream, and when they asked him to sign an Act of Secrecy, he did it gladly.

He thought everything would go back to normal. He thought he could ignore the nightmares, pretend he didn't look at shadows with a shade of trepidation. He didn't realize the same bad dream had permanently taken away Nancy's best friend. He didn't realize she silently choked down sobs in her dead friend's bathroom.

He thought himself changed for the better. Turned out he hadn't changed enough. He was still the same selfish asshole, and his selfish love finally succeeded in driving Nancy Wheeler away from him.

They made her sign an Act of Secrecy. They made her pretend she knew nothing about Barb's death. They made her pretend she didn't

know her best friend was dead. She had to have dinner with Barb's clueless parents and talk about *hope*.

The disgust that roiled up her throat was putrid and vile. She wanted to throw up. She excused herself, shut herself in the bathroom, and cried tears of disgust.

Covering this up was wrong. Not telling the people that needed to be told was *wrong*. She couldn't accept this. She *wouldn't* accept this.

She'd gone up against a flesh-eating demon from a shadow world once, and that fact gave her a solid foundation on which to build the logic of her determination. Discrediting a rotten government agency shouldn't prove any harder than battling a real monster, she reasoned. The stakes weren't much different. She'd faced the threat of death before.

What if I'm not enough? whispered the fear she was fighting to ignore.

She was moderately certain she wouldn't need any help in the endeavor she was planning. But she still asked Jonathan Byers if he wanted to help, and he said yes.

Even her whispering fears knew not to question his trustworthiness. Fighting a monster with only two other equally scared dumbasses for support tended to do that to you.

. . . Steve was being dumb. She . . . couldn't deal with him just now. She could fix things with him after she did something about the way her friend was being dishonored by not being allowed to be dead.

She skipped fourth period and felt not a sliver of anxiety for it.

How could I, Jonathan thought, determinedly chasing away what-ifs and suppressing the loud thumping of his heartbeat in his ears. *How dare I*.

He'd acted like a disgusting creep to her. He was unattractive, unlikeable, poor, colossally messed up on all fronts of human interaction, and just . . . not right for her. Nancy Wheeler deserved someone better, someone who loved her more and treated her like she was the best thing to happen to this world.

But when he nearly bumped into her in the doorway of a drunk conspiracy addict's basement, his traitorous brain thought, *Why can't I love her?*

Because you're a horrible piece of shit, he told his brain, shoving it back down.

But, said his brain.

He went back to Nancy's door, and she kissed him like *he* was the best thing to happen to this world, and for the first time in his life Jonathan Byers thought to wonder, *What if she loves me back?*

Jonathan Byers was quiet. He was awkward. He dressed in threadbare sweaters and took pictures to capture obscure emotions.

He was brave, he was kind, and Nancy thought she might be in love with him.

I love you, Steve nearly said. *I'm sorry*, was on the tip of his tongue. *I can do better, Nancy, please*, was what he wanted to say.

He had a filter now. He thought about what he wanted, he thought about what she wanted, and he chose his words.

“It’s okay, Nance,” he told her, and meant it.

The sweltering heat crowded into Jonathan, stuck his sweater to his back and made sweat coat his face. His mother's boyfriend had been torn apart by a pack of monsters only hours ago, his little brother was screaming like his insides were being scraped out with a shovel, and he could do nothing about either of those things.

He turned his back on Will's spasming body and threw himself into Nancy's open arms. She squeezed him close, and Jonathan thought she was the only solid thing about his life.

Will was shrieking like a demon. Jonathan looked like he wanted to die.

Nancy Wheeler had long since lost her hesitation when it came to taking action. She snatched up a poker from the fireplace and shoved it into the thirteen-year-old's side.

Approximately three months after the Snow Ball—where Mike kissed Eleven and Nancy danced with Dustin—the lights of the whole town flickered out. Overloaded electrical systems. Harmless, if a bit of an annoyance. No one thought much of it, except for a handful of people.

The Wheelers had been in the middle of dinner, making conversation

no one was much interested in. As soon as the electricity died, Mike and Nancy shared one terrified look and bolted for their respective rooms, Nancy for the gun beneath her mattress and Mike for his walkie-talkie. (Mr. and Mrs. Wheeler blinked after their children in confusion. Then Mrs. Wheeler went to find the candles.) While his older sister watched the shadows with a finger on the trigger, Mike contacted first Lucas—who promised to call Max—then Dustin.

Steve was babysitting Dustin when the lights died. He immediately grabbed a flashlight and made a quick trip to his car trunk, where he kept a nailed-up bat, just in case. When he got back, Dustin was on the radio with Mike Wheeler.

“I’m fine, I’ve got Steve and his bat,” Dustin was saying. “He’s the next best thing to your sister with a gun, you know.”

It was nice to know he ranked above Jonathan Byers in Dustin’s books. Steve sat down next to the kid as he radioed Will and absently drummed his fingers along the length of his bat.

When the electricity went out, Jonathan’s first instinct was to race for his little brother’s room, wielding the first thing he could grab (a lamp) and a lighter. Joyce barged in only a moment later, a kitchen knife in one hand. They kept their vigilance long after Will got the “everyone’s fine” call from Dustin and passed it on to Eleven.

(Eleven, who’d been getting ready to charge out into the pitch-black night accompanied by a heavily armed Hopper, sat back down on the sagging couch and gave her father a relieved smile.)

The next morning, Jonathan’s dark circles were an extra shade darker.

“Couldn’t sleep?” Nancy asked ruefully, perched on the hood of Jonathan’s truck.

He shrugged. "You never know when your little brother might be snatched out of bed." He nodded at her bloodshot eyes. "You okay?"

She shrugged. "I've functioned without sleep before."

Steve stumbled to a stop next to them, sunglasses firmly covering his eyes. "I don't like being in the No Sleep Club," he complained, leaning heavily over the car's hood. "It's consistently awful."

"The price of being Hawkins's guardian babysitter," Nancy commented dryly.

"I really hate this town," Steve groaned.

"You're not alone," Jonathan muttered.

Nancy slid off of Jonathan's car. "Right. Come along boys, we've got Calculus for first period, and I do not want to be late."

Author's Note:

A collage of moments from my fav teenagers, un-betaed. I enjoyed writing it. I hope you enjoyed reading it.